



Transformative Visionary Leadership in the Era of the Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study in an Islamic Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum requires school leadership that can integrate long-term strategic vision, pedagogical innovation, and cultural transformation. This study examines how visionary leadership is constructed and enacted within an Islamic educational institution undergoing curriculum reform. Employing a qualitative approach with a single-case study design, the research was conducted at SMP IT Aqidah Bekasi using in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive framework, revealing five major themes: vision articulation and strategic alignment, communication of change, strengthening of school culture, integration of Islamic spiritual values, and teacher empowerment. The findings indicate that visionary leadership operates as an integrative force that connects the school's strategic direction with its spiritual and cultural identity. The principal effectively translated future-oriented aspirations into collaborative practices, fostered psychological safety, and encouraged instructional innovation consistent with Islamic values. The study proposes a conceptual model of value-driven visionary leadership suitable for Islamic schools navigating the complexities of curriculum reform. These findings contribute to the scholarly discourse on leadership in faith-based educational settings and offer practical insights for Islamic institutions seeking to strengthen transformative leadership capacity in alignment with national educational aspirations toward Indonesia Emas 2045.

Keywords: *visionary leadership; Merdeka Curriculum; Islamic education; school transformation; teacher empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, educational institutions must navigate rapid and multifaceted changes brought about by advancements in technology, globalization, and evolving educational paradigms. As the complexity of teaching and learning increases, the necessity for strong visionary leadership becomes paramount. Visionary leaders not only shape the future direction of schools but also inspire innovation and create empowering learning environments. It is through such leadership that educational transformations can be effectively guided, ensuring that reforms are substantial changes that enhance learning quality.

In Indonesia, the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum has significantly redefined the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders. This curriculum emphasizes differentiated instruction, granting teachers greater autonomy to design learning experiences tailored to student needs, and is centered around the development of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, which focuses on character formation and civic engagement (Rokayah et al., 2023). Within this framework, school principals are expected to act as both transformational and visionary leaders. They must navigate the dual responsibilities of overseeing the curriculum's implementation while simultaneously fostering an environment that nurtures creativity, innovation, and collaboration among staff and students (Wasehudin et al., 2023). Importantly, without strong visionary leadership, initiatives such as the Merdeka Curriculum may devolve into mere procedural tasks lacking significant impact on educational outcomes (Lailiyah & Imami, 2023).

Islamic educational institutions, particularly those grounded in spiritual and moral values, face unique challenges during this transformation. Leaders in these contexts must harmonize curriculum innovations with the preservation of Islamic identities and values (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022). Research indicates that effective leadership in Islamic schools hinges not solely on managerial aptitudes but also on embodying spiritual leadership qualities, including ethical conduct and moral integrity (Zaenab et al., 2024). This integration of visionary leadership and Islamic values is crucial for ensuring that educational transformation is rooted in a strong ethical foundation, thus aligning with the moral objectives of the institutions.

SMP IT Aqidah in Bekasi serves as a pertinent case study for examining visionary leadership within Islamic education during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. As an integrated Islamic school, SMP IT Aqidah strives for academic excellence while reinforcing students' spiritual development. The principal's role, along with the management team's efforts, is essential in establishing a clear vision for change, reinforcing teacher capabilities, aligning curriculum developments, and fostering a forward-thinking school culture (Lailiyah & Imami, 2023). In this context, understanding how visionary leadership is

enacted, the strategies employed for change, and the integration of Islamic values becomes vital for comprehensively grasping the transformation process.

Despite the clear need for research at this intersection, existing studies often focus on the technical aspects of curriculum implementation or instructional effectiveness, neglecting the critical role of leadership in driving transformation (Rohimajaya & Hamer, 2023). Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore how visionary leadership shapes the transformation process at SMP IT Aqidah while carefully weaving in the values fundamental to Islamic education. Insights from this research could inform practices in other Islamic schools navigating similar reforms, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education in line with Indonesia's aspirations for a robust educational framework by 2045, as emphasized in the Indonesia Emas 2045 vision (Saputra, 2025).

This research endeavors not only to contribute to the academic discourse on visionary leadership in Islamic education but also to provide practical guidelines through a conceptual model beneficial for other institutions. By articulating the interplay between visionary leadership, educational change, and Islamic values, this study seeks to illuminate pathways for effective school transformation in the context of Indonesia's evolving educational landscape. The findings from the qualitative case study conducted at SMP IT Aqidah reveal significant insights into how visionary leadership operates within Islamic educational institutions, particularly amid the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This discussion synthesizes the findings with existing literature on visionary leadership, transformational leadership, educational change management, and Islamic spiritual leadership.

Visionary and Transformational Leadership

The study elucidates how visionary leadership serves as a foundational element in navigating educational transformation. The principal's articulation of a future-oriented vision aligns with Leithwood's assertion that effective leaders create a shared purpose that mobilizes collective commitment (Serey et al., 2025). This vision not only guides the strategic alignment of educational goals but also inspires the entire school community to strive towards the intended outcomes inherent in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Furthermore, the principal's approach resonates with the principles of transformational leadership, characterized by individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (A'yun et al., 2024). Evidence from the study indicates that the principal actively engaged teachers through reflective mentoring and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing a supportive climate that encourages innovation and adaptation during periods of change (Jiang, 2020). By fostering an environment of trust, the principal helps teachers overcome resistance to new methodologies essential for the curriculum's

successful enactment.

Change Management Challenges and Strategies

The findings also highlight the multifaceted challenges of change management within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Effective change management entails not only operational restructuring but also the cultural integration of reform initiatives. This study emphasizes that for Islamic schools, leadership must effectively bridge the gap between modern educational demands and traditional values. The principal's strategies—focused on collaborative planning, communication, and cultural reinforcement—demonstrate a comprehensive approach to change management that aligns with the needs of both the educational system and the school's spiritual mission (Serey et al., 2025).

The Role of Islamic Spiritual Leadership

Additionally, this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic spiritual leadership by illustrating its pivotal role in enhancing organizational legitimacy and commitment to ethical standards. The integration of concepts such as amanah, ihsan, and ukhuwah into daily practices helps create a learning environment rooted in profound moral values, which is essential during the transformative processes (Serey et al., 2025). This fusion of visionary and spiritual leadership promotes an educational culture that values integrity and ethical behavior, guiding both students and staff through the complexities of educational innovation.

Teacher Empowerment and Capacity Building

Another crucial theme that emerged from the study relates to teacher empowerment, aligning with existing literature that posits the significance of professional development and leadership-driven capacity building (A'yun et al., 2024). By equipping teachers with the skills and mindset necessary to embrace the Merdeka Curriculum, the principal not only facilitates a smoother implementation process but also fosters a culture of educational innovation. Empowerment initiatives that promote autonomy among teachers are instrumental in nurturing a growth-oriented teaching approach that is essential for holistic student development (Serey et al., 2025).

In conclusion, this study underscores the vital role of visionary leadership in shaping and sustaining school transformation amidst the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings affirm that effective educational leadership integrates principles from visionary and transformational leadership frameworks while being anchored in Islamic values. The interplay of these dimensions is essential to navigate the complexities of leading an Islamic educational institution during times of significant reform.

Future studies should continue to explore these interconnections through empirical inquiry, potentially utilizing comparative qualitative frameworks to enhance understanding of leadership dynamics across diverse contexts within Islamic education. This ongoing exploration can contribute to the theoretical framework while offering practical guidance for other Islamic schools undertaking similar reforms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a single case study design, appropriate for capturing the complexity, depth, and contextual nuances of leadership practices within a specific educational setting. A qualitative case study enables an in-depth exploration of how visionary leadership is enacted, negotiated, and experienced within the everyday realities of school transformation. The case study design is particularly suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined. In this research, the focus on visionary leadership during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP IT Aqidah required a design that could accommodate multiple data sources and allow for detailed analysis of leadership behavior, cultural dynamics, and organizational processes.

Research Site, Participants, and Timeline

The study was conducted at SMP IT Aqidah, an Islamic integrated school located in Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia. This site was selected purposively because the school is actively engaged in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and is undergoing structural and cultural transformation, making it an appropriate context for examining visionary leadership in action. The participants included the principal, vice principal for curriculum (Wakakur), core teachers responsible for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, subject teachers, and—optionally—student leaders (OSIS/MPK) to capture perspectives on leadership from multiple stakeholder groups.

Data collection took place from 24 to 28 November 2025, aligning with the structured research timeline established prior to the study. This period allowed the researchers to observe school activities, conduct interviews, and gather relevant documents while the implementation of the curriculum was actively unfolding.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure rich and comprehensive data, three primary techniques were employed:

1. In-depth interviews with the school principal, Wakakur, and teachers to explore leadership perceptions, strategies, and experiences during the transformation process.
2. Non-participant observations conducted in classrooms, teacher discussions, and school routines to capture leadership actions, communication patterns, and school culture manifestations.
3. Document analysis, including the school's vision–mission statements, curriculum documentation (CP, ATP, modules), academic reports, and internal policy documents relevant to the Merdeka Curriculum.

The triangulation of these techniques allowed for a multifaceted understanding of visionary leadership as practiced within the school.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

1. Data condensation involved transcribing interviews, organizing field notes, and conducting initial coding to identify emerging patterns.
2. Data display included the construction of thematic matrices to visualize relationships among themes such as vision articulation, cultural alignment, and change communication.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification were performed through the iterative examination of emerging themes, cross-case comparisons of data sources, and reflective analytical memos.
4. This cyclical process enabled continuous refinement of categories and ensured analytic rigor.

Trustworthiness and Data Validation

To ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability, several trustworthiness strategies were implemented. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, documents) enhanced the credibility of interpretations. Member checking was conducted by sharing summarized findings with key participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their perspectives. Peer debriefing with the supervising lecturer provided additional analytical scrutiny and mitigated potential biases. Audit trails documenting analytic decisions and coding processes were maintained to ensure transparency and replicability. These strategies collectively reinforced the methodological robustness of the study and ensured that the findings fairly represented the lived experiences of leadership at SMP IT Aqidah.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Major Themes of the Findings

The findings from data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis reveal five significant themes that exemplify the enactment of visionary leadership during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP IT Aqidah:

1. Vision Articulation and Strategic Alignment
2. Communication of Change
3. Strengthening of School Culture
4. Integration of Islamic Spiritual Values
5. Teacher Empowerment and Capacity Building

The first theme, vision articulation and strategic alignment, highlights the principal's role in offering a clear and motivational direction for the school's transition to the Merdeka Curriculum. The vision centered on student autonomy, differentiated learning, and enhancement of Islamic character. This capacity to articulate a compelling vision serves as the cornerstone for aligning curriculum planning, pedagogical decisions, and professional development initiatives. Regular reference to the school's vision and mission documents proves essential in maintaining coherence between policy objectives and practical instructional applications.

The second theme, communication of change, underscores the principal's proactive strategies to mitigate resistance and enhance understanding among staff. Organizing regular coordination meetings, reflective discussions, and informal mentoring sessions significantly aided teachers in addressing uncertainties related to the new curriculum's instructional shifts. Observations confirmed that the principal employed an open-door communication policy, fostering ongoing dialogue and establishing psychological safety—elements critical during times of organizational change.

The third theme, strengthening school culture, reflects initiatives taken to establish a supportive environment that fosters reform. Leadership endorsed collaborative planning, peer observations, and cross-disciplinary learning communities, allowing teachers to explore new instructional methodologies and share best practices. The cultural emphasis placed on teamwork, discipline, respect, and continuous learning collectively contributed to bolstering resilience amidst change.

The fourth theme, the integration of Islamic spiritual values, illustrates how leadership encompassed moral and spiritual principles throughout the transformation process. Core values such as amanah, ihsan, and ukhuwah shaped decision-making and influenced interpersonal relationships within the

school. These values solidified the legitimacy of reform initiatives and reinforced teacher dedication, as they resonated with the institution's Islamic identity and purpose.

The fifth theme, teacher empowerment and capacity building, underscores targeted professional development efforts, including workshops, instructional coaching, and lesson study activities essential for preparing teachers for the Merdeka Curriculum. Leadership recognized that with the autonomy required by the new curriculum, teachers needed not only technical skills but also a mindset geared for growth. Empowerment strategies encouraged teachers to innovate, reflect, and take ownership of their educational practices.

Together, these themes elucidate a leadership approach that harmonizes future-oriented planning with the established moral and religious foundation of SMP IT Aqidah. The study's findings contribute to enriching the understanding of how visionary and spiritual leadership intersect in the context of Islamic educational reform, particularly during the transformative processes associated with the Merdeka Curriculum. The interplay between these dimensions warrants further exploration, specifically concerning empirical, case-based research. Continued inquiry may provide crucial insights that can enhance leadership practices and educational outcomes within Islamic settings.

Integrative Discussion

The findings from the qualitative case study of visionary leadership at SMP IT Aqidah demonstrate a coherent alignment with the theories of visionary leadership, transformational leadership, and educational change management. The principal's clear articulation of a long-term direction exemplifies key aspects of visionary leadership, particularly in fostering a shared sense of purpose and inspiring collective commitment among staff and students. This is consistent with Leithwood's argument that effective leaders leverage vision as a foundational element for organizational coherence (Utami et al. (2024).

The emphasis on effective communication, teacher support, and relational trust parallels the principles of transformational leadership, where behaviors such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation are crucial. The principal employed mentoring strategies that facilitated structural changes while also addressing teacher belief systems and professional identities, vital outcomes for sustainable curriculum reform (Silam et al., 2021). This approach corresponds with findings that indicate strong leadership enhances teacher engagement and contributes to healthy school climates, which are critical for overcoming resistance during transitions (Yusutria et al., 2022; Hiçyılmaz & Şahin, 2024).

The findings also align with established change management models, such as Kotter's framework, emphasizing the importance of creating urgency, building coalitions, and institutionalizing new practices. The principal's strategies, which

include collaborative planning and continuous communication, mirror these stages, suggesting successful change initiatives in Islamic schools necessitate deep integration of value systems within the organizational framework (Siregar et al., 2024; Sulasmi & Akrim, 2023). This integration highlights that effective educational reform goes beyond structural changes; it requires alignment between institutional transformation and the values of the school community.

The incorporation of Islamic spiritual leadership into the findings offers a significant contribution to existing literature. In Islamic educational settings, leadership is closely linked to ethical guidance and value-driven practices. The principal's commitment to principles such as *akhlaq* (moral character), humility, and service-oriented leadership exemplifies how visionary aspirations can be integrated with ethical foundations, enhancing commitment and trust within the educational community (Putri & Kalstum, 2022; Ajmi, 2024).

Additionally, a significant focus on teacher empowerment emerged from the study. Effective professional development initiatives, including workshops and instructional coaching, underscore the importance of nurturing teacher autonomy and creativity—key components of the Merdeka Curriculum (Hsieh et al., 2021). This emphasis on empowerment is supported by evidence indicating that leadership-driven professional capacity building is a crucial factor for successful curriculum implementation. Such empowerment reduces resistance to change, enhances teacher autonomy, and promotes pedagogical innovation, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes (Hardianto et al., 2024; Adenia & Mohamed, 2022).

In summary, the findings from this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding leadership in Islamic educational settings, especially during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. By articulating a vision rooted in both educational innovation and Islamic values, the principal at SMP IT Aqidah embodies a transformative approach to leadership that not only aligns with established theoretical frameworks but also enriches them with contextually relevant insights. Future research should continue to explore the intricate relationships between visionary leadership, spiritual leadership, and effective educational reform within the diverse cultural landscape of Islamic education in Indonesia.

Conceptual Model of Visionary Leadership in Islamic Schools Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The proposed conceptual model illustrates the dynamic nature of visionary leadership within an Islamic educational setting as it undergoes transformation through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This model comprises four interrelated components that collectively help navigate the intricacies of educational reform while aligning with the school's spiritual and moral identity.

1. Visioning and Strategic Alignment

At the core of visionary leadership is the clear articulation of a future-oriented vision deeply rooted in educational innovation and Islamic values. This vision acts as a decision-making compass guiding all aspects of the school's strategic actions. The emphasis on developing civic responsibilities within the educational framework further enriches the vision's contextual relevance (Ningrum & Muthali'in, 2023). Leaders ensure that this vision shapes curriculum planning, pedagogical choices, and professional development initiatives, supporting coherence across organizational practices.

2. Value-Driven Cultural Transformation

Islamic spiritual principles provide the ethical foundation upon which the reform of the school culture is constructed. Concepts such as amanah (trustworthiness), ihsan (excellence), and ukhuwah (solidarity) imbue the transformation process with moral integrity while motivating collective action among staff and students. The emphasis on instilling these values is crucial in fostering a conducive learning environment, as suggested by research that integrates educational philosophies with cultural dimensions (Hunaepi et al., 2023).

3. Communicative and Collaborative Change Processes

Effective communication channels, collaborative frameworks, and reflective forums function as mechanisms for translating the articulated vision into actionable practices and enabling internalization among teachers. The communication strategies employed by school leaders must promote inclusivity and ongoing dialogue, facilitating understanding and reducing resistance during the implementation process. Collaborative planning and peer observation prepare teachers to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches while sharing best practices to foster a sense of community and teamwork (Zainuri et al., 2023).

4. Teacher Empowerment and Instructional Innovation

The model underscores the importance of empowering teachers through continuous professional development initiatives, support for instructional autonomy, and targeted coaching. Empowerment initiatives enable teachers to enact the Merdeka Curriculum creatively and confidently. Building professional capacity through structured development programs results in enhanced enactment of curriculum reforms, thereby improving overall educational outcomes. By cultivating a growth-oriented mindset, teachers are better equipped to adapt to changing pedagogical expectations and innovate their instructional practices.

Together, these four components interact dynamically, facilitating sustainable transformation within Islamic schools. Vision provides direction, values offer moral grounding, communication ensures coherence, and teacher empowerment supports pedagogical integrity. This model presents a comprehensive framework for understanding how Islamic educational institutions can navigate the complex demands of the Merdeka Curriculum while retaining their cultural and spiritual identity. Future research can benefit from exploring the practical applications of this model, evaluating its implications across various contexts within Islamic education in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The study conducted on visionary leadership at SMP IT Aqidah sheds light on the complexities of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within an Islamic educational context. Through an integrative approach that merges visionary leadership theory with ethical Islamic values, the findings underscore the pivotal role of school leadership in facilitating transformative educational practices. The analysis indicates that visionary leadership is instrumental not merely as a strategic instrument but as an integrative force that harmonizes vision, values, culture, and professional capacity across the school system.

The principal's ability to articulate a clear vision—rooted in Islamic moral principles—not only provided coherence throughout the reform process but also established legitimacy among staff, students, and the wider community. Communication strategies, collaborative structures, and teacher empowerment initiatives emerged as critical components that translated this vision into actionable instructional practices, fostering an environment conducive to innovation and growth.

Importantly, the research highlights that successful curriculum reform in Islamic educational settings necessitates leadership that integrates spiritual values with contemporary educational demands. This alignment is paramount for empowering teachers and enabling them to navigate the complexities of new pedagogical approaches while remaining faithful to their religious and moral framework.

Moreover, this study offers a conceptual model that can guide Islamic schools through systemic transformation while preserving their cultural and spiritual identities. Future research could expand upon this inquiry by examining multi-site comparative studies or incorporating quantitative approaches to measure the impact of visionary leadership on instructional and organizational outcomes.

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